Changing Soviet Perceptions Of World Politics and the USSR's International Role

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A new note of Soviet self-confidence in international affairs, seen in Moscow as validating the concept of a progressive historical march, is emerging in the 1970s. Other major powers are not viewed as having changed their basically hostile attitudes toward the USSR, but the Soviets feel greater assurance about their capacity to deal with them and less exaggerated concern for their effects on Soviet security. Since insecurity has been a major factor motivating

Soviet policies in the past, it is not surprising that new directions in Soviet foreign policy have accompanied the new psychological mood. Moscow perceives a new need today for normalized relations with major states, especially the US, and has learned from experience that working within the existing international system is more likely to serve Soviet interests than frontal challenges to other great powers or to the system itself. Largely for this reason the Soviet leaders have developed an increased stake in international stability and have come to accept the prospect of an indefinite period of coexistence with the West.

Moscow still expects and seeks international change. But the USSR cannot, in a period of detente, be the direct agent for much of the change its leaders still hope will occur. And while a residual belief in the eventual attainment of ultimate Soviet aims in the basic world struggle still exists in the USSR, the Soviets have increasingly adjusted their sights, conceptually and operationally, to short-run and intermediate-range goals. Achievement of even these, the Soviets realize, depends on success in working with forces that often act independently of Soviet sway and in overcoming simultaneous countervailing trends.

Sources of Soviet Perceptions

Soviet ideology supplies the basic conceptual framework used by

Soviet observers in analyzing international affairs. The interpretation of world events this ideology provides is dynamic: it posits a fundamental struggle on a global scale, presupposes constant change, and gives impetus to an activist foreign policy. Yet while Marxism-Leninism attunes Soviet observers to the key role that events within states play in affecting international behavior, it explains little beyond the general and abstract about relations among states. And although the Soviet outlook could be called utopian in terms of its stated goals, most Soviet leaders from 1917 onwards have consciously stressed realism and caution in practical policy matters and warned of the dangers of adventurism in the long-term international competition between the emerging new order and the declining old. In this regard, Brezhnev follows the examples of Lenin and Stalin rather than Khrushchev.

The wider Soviet involvement in recent years in world affairs and a belief that internal progress, especially toward economic goals, is increasingly dependent on international relationships have led Soviet leaders to seek a more accurate picture of the world. They have tried to enhance the capabilities of their channels of information about foreign events and, of particular note, to obtain more and better analysis of that information. A larger role has been assigned to the academic institutes in Moscow, especially the Institute of US

and Canadian Studies and the Institute of the World Economy and International Relations, which are involved in providing policy-makers with estimative judgments about international affairs.

How deeply rooted the newer Soviet perceptions have become cannot be told with certainty. The current leaders lived through the Stalin era, with its articulate and heavily propagandized set of ideas stressing the hostility of the international environment, Soviet insecurity, and the necessity of avoiding foreign contact. This era has left deep and widespread Soviet doubts about the wisdom and orthodoxy of enmeshing the USSR in dealings with the capitalist powers and making compromises with the West. Yet despite the persisting influence of ingrained views, perceptions do not remain static. Doctrinally pure positions are possible only when events are viewed at a distance. Involvement with events requires that dogma make room for pragmatism, lest unrealism drive the Soviet state into an isolationist position. The post-Stalin generation of Soviet leaders has already changed its outlook in significant ways because of international experience, the influence of personal and institutional roles and interests, and newly perceived needs. A new generation of post-Brezhnev leaders could also develop new perceptions of international problems and new ideas of what Soviet national interests require in terms of international behavior.

The New International Situation

The measuring standard and key determinant of the USSR's progress in the worldwide political struggle postulated by the Soviets is the international "correlation of forces." In weighing the strengths of the two sides, the Soviets attach great importance to the power of the principal states, especially their economic and military capabilities and potential. But less tangible social and political factors are also considered to be important, hence the continual Soviet assessing of US domestic cohesion and willpower.

In the Soviet view the world since 1917 has been in gradual transition from a purely capitalist system to a socialist one, the most dramatic single advance being the Sovietization of East Europe after World War II. But the 1970s, the Soviets argue, have brought a further significant, even radical favorable change in the international balance. Some Soviet commentary seems to imply a tipping of the balance past a notional midway point, as though "socialism" now possessed more than half of a world power pie. The factor mainly responsible for the new correlation of forces, in Moscow's view, is Soviet strategic nuclear strength, built up over the last ten years to a level roughly equivalent to that of the US. Also contributing to Soviet optimism is the combination of economic, social, and political problems currently plaguing the West, which

Moscow views as unprecedented. In Soviet eyes these problems have made the present phase of capitalism's "general crisis" unusually deep and persistent and have thrown the West into its most serious disarray since World War II.

The Soviets are unsure about what developments will flow from this "crisis," however, and realize that any relative advantages they now enjoy rest on an uncertain foundation. More pronounced leftward trends in West European politics (especially Communist participation in coalition governments in France and Italy) seem likely to them, but they also see in the present-day Western condition the seeds of possible civil wars and the specter of revived fascism. The Soviets apparently believe that capitalism cannot escape suffering permanent disabilities as a consequence of its problems and that it is already in a qualitatively new stage of its decline. But at the same time they have respect for the capacity of the capitalist system to devise effective methods for coping with even such serious problems as the oil issue and to bounce back because of the overall size and resiliency of the Western economic system.

The Soviets have also had difficulties in determining the meaning of the Western disarray for their own foreign policy. Some Party elements reportedly feel that not enough is being done to take advantage of the new international situation, and West European

Communist parties are receiving conflicting signals from Moscow on just how best to improve their individual political positions. So far, however, in line with the Soviet propensity in the 1970s increasingly to dissociate the world revolutionary struggle from the ordinary conduct of interstate relations and place emphasis on the latter, the most authoritative Soviet expositions of the Western "crisis" have been more in the nature of efforts to steer the detente policy over the shoals of this unanticipated situation than of justifications for revising course.

In no case has this been more clearly true than for Soviet relations with the US, which remain the key factor affecting the overall Soviet international role. In the 1970s the US moved toward detente with the USSR and accommodated itself to the growth of Soviet strategic forces and a Soviet role in resolving major world problems. Whether this "realistic" US attitude will be sustained is the chief question for Soviet policy-makers. The Soviets believe that the US altered its foreign outlook in the early 1970s largely for pragmatic reasons: the old policy was simply becoming less effective and too expensive. But the new US policy, the Soviets believe, rests on an unconsolidated domestic base, the consensus supporting earlier US policies has broken down, but no agreement has yet been reached on what should take its place. The Soviet

reading of the situation in the US throughout the 1975 "pause" in detente has been that the pro-detente forces are still more powerful than their enemies, but that the latter remain strong, still tapping a reservoir of anti-Soviet feelings not yet completely dissipated from the Cold War.

The newfound Soviet confidence is not free from counterbalancing factors, and Moscow does not see the shifts in the international "correlation of forces" wholly one-sidedly. For one thing, the favorable changes that have occurred in the 1970s are not irrevocable. In this critical regard they differ from postwar Soviet gains in East Europe, which are judged to be "irreversible." Even the lengthy and expensive Soviet nuclear missile buildup does not guarantee future strategic stability or even parity.

Moscow is also clearly aware of the storm clouds on its international horizon. Chief among them is China, whose "loss" greatly damaged the USSR's image as the nucleus of an ever-increasing international political movement and whose deep-seated hostility threatens to outlive Mao. But Europe too, the recent collective security agreement notwithstanding, contains a self-assured West Germany and has shown little susceptibility to increases in Soviet influence despite spells of political turmoil and lessened fears of the Soviet military threat. The emergence of several secondary power centers in

the world is welcomed by Moscow as representing a decline in US authority among its chief partners, but the Soviets are uneasy about what direction these newly independent political forces will take. While the Soviet perception of the world as enemy is changing, it has not been replaced by one of the world as oyster, ripe with opportunities to be exploited.

The Soviet International Role

Soviet policy today is informed by a sense of "having arrived" internationally. By successfully weathering critical trials over the years, the Soviets believe that the USSR has demonstrated a capacity to sustain itself and grow in a dangerous and unpredictable international environment. There is also considerable national pride connected with the Soviet international role that is important to a people whose sense of inferiority vis-à-vis other great powers and cultures has been great and to a regime in need of evidence of its own competence and legitimacy. The Soviets feel that their international prestige is more solidly based today than was the case under Khrushchev, whose incautious political moves aroused rather than impressed adversaries and bought little influence in other countries. A stronger and more secure USSR does not guarantee success in all foreign undertakings, but it does mean a more active and influential Soviet international presence.

Current Soviet perceptions of world affairs, however, imply a degree of instability for Soviet policy. Although political changes such as those in southern Europe from Turkey to Portugal, tempt Moscow to see and act on opportunities for Soviet advantage, the Soviet leaders are aware that greater militancy would damage their relations with the West without assuring any expansion of Soviet influence. While the Soviets are prepared to intervene abroad in areas and on occasions when they think the political and military risks are justified -- as seems to be the case in Angola -- they must continuously reassess the costs involved. In the rest of the 1970s and beyond the USSR may find itself even more subject to the strains inherent in its contradictory international roles: how effectively can it continue to represent itself as revolutionary, progressive, and the patron of the have-nots of this world while seeking expanded friendship with the US, recognition as a rich and advanced country, and stability in certain regimes and regions? There will probably continue to be a strong Soviet attitude in favor of keeping relations with the US and other major powers on a reasonably even keel, despite inevitable ups and downs. But mutuality of interest and viewpoint beyween East and West has long been anathema in the USSR, and reaching genuine compromises with the West will never be an easy or a natural process for Soviet leaders.